

CHAPTER 2

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Many of us have been taught to believe that there are distinct biological and genetic differences between races. This biology accounts for visual differences such as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape, and traits that we believe we see such as sexuality, athleticism, or mathematical ability. The idea of race as a biological construct makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural. But race, like gender, is socially constructed. The differences we see with our eyes—differences such as hair texture and eye color—are superficial and emerged as adaptations to geography.¹ Under the skin, there is no true biological race. The external characteristics that we use to define race are unreliable indicators of genetic variation between any two people.²

However, the belief that race and the differences associated with it are biological is deep-seated. To challenge the belief in race as biology, we need to understand the social and economic investments that drove science to organize society and its resources along racial lines and why this organization is so enduring.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

Freedom and equality—regardless of religion or class status—were radical new ideas when the United States was formed. At the same time, the US economy was based on the abduction and enslavement of African

people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands. Further, the colonizers who came were not free of their own cultural conditioning; they brought with them deeply internalized patterns of domination and submission.³

The tension between the noble ideology of equality and the cruel reality of genocide, enslavement, and colonization had to be reconciled. Thomas Jefferson (who himself owned hundreds of enslaved people) and others turned to science. Jefferson suggested that there were natural differences between the races and asked scientists to find them.⁴ If science could prove that black people were naturally and inherently inferior (he saw Indigenous people as culturally deficient—a shortcoming that could be remedied), there would be no contradiction between our professed ideals and our actual practices. There were, of course, enormous economic interests in justifying enslavement and colonization. Race science was driven by these social and economic interests, which came to establish cultural norms and legal rulings that legitimized racism and the privileged status of those defined as white.

Drawing on the work of Europeans before them, American scientists began searching for the answer to the perceived inferiority of non-Anglo groups. Illustrating the power of our questions to shape the knowledge we validate, these scientists didn't ask, "Are blacks (and others) inferior?" They asked, "Why are blacks (and others) inferior?" In less than a century, Jefferson's suggestion of racial difference became commonly accepted scientific "fact."⁵

The idea of racial inferiority was created to justify unequal treatment; belief in racial inferiority is not what triggered unequal treatment. Nor was fear of difference. As Ta-Nehisi Coates states, "But race is the child of racism, not the father."⁶ He means that first we exploited people for their resources, not according to how they looked. Exploitation came first, and then the ideology of unequal races to justify this exploitation followed. Similarly, historian Ibram Kendi, in his National Book Award-winning work *Stamped from the Beginning*, explains: "The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving

of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people.”⁷ Kendi goes on to argue that if we truly believe that all humans are equal, then disparity in condition can only be the result of systemic discrimination.

THE PERCEPTION OF RACE

Race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage. The term “white” first appeared in colonial law in the late 1600s. By 1790, people were asked to claim their race on the census, and by 1825, the perceived degrees of blood determined who would be classified as Indian. From the late 1800s through the early twentieth century, as waves of immigrants entered the United States, the concept of a white race was solidified.⁸

When slavery in the United States was abolished in 1865, whiteness remained profoundly important as legalized racist exclusion and violence against African Americans continued in new forms. To have citizenship—and the rights citizenship imbued—you had to be legally classified as white. People with nonwhite racial classifications began to petition the courts to be reclassified. Now the courts were in the position to decide who was white and who was not. For example, Armenians won their case to be reclassified as white with the help of a scientific witness who claimed they were scientifically “Caucasian.” In 1922, the Supreme Court ruled that the Japanese could not be legally white, because they were scientifically classified as “Mongoloid.” A year later, the court stated that Asian Indians were not legally white, even though they were also scientifically classified as “Caucasian.” To justify these contradictory rulings, the court stated that being white was based on the common understanding of the white man. In other words, people already seen as white got to decide who was white.⁹

The metaphor of the United States as the great melting pot, in which immigrants from around the world come together and melt into one

unified society through the process of assimilation, is a cherished idea. Once new immigrants learn English and adapt to American culture and customs, they become Americans. In reality, only European immigrants were allowed to melt, or assimilate, into dominant culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, regardless of their ethnic identities, these immigrants were perceived to be white and thus could belong.

Race is a social construction, and thus who is included in the category of white changes over time. As the Italian American man from my workshop noted, European ethnic groups such as the Irish, Italian, and Polish were excluded in the past. But where they may have been originally divided in terms of origin, European immigrants became racially united through assimilation.¹⁰ This process of assimilation—speaking English, eating “American” foods, discarding customs that set them apart—reified the perception of American as white. Racial identification in the larger society plays a fundamental role in identity development, in how we see ourselves.

If we “look white,” we are treated as white in society at large. For example, people of southern European heritage, such as Spanish or Portuguese, or from the former Soviet Union, especially if they are new immigrants or were raised by immigrants, are likely to have a stronger sense of ethnic identity than will someone of the same ethnicity whose ancestors have been here for generations. Yet although their internal identity may be different, if they “pass” as white, they will still have a white experience externally. If they look white, the default assumption will be that they are white and thus they will be responded to as white. The incongruity between their internal ethnic identity (e.g., Portuguese, Spanish) and external racial experience (white) would provide a more complex or nuanced sense of identity than that of someone who doesn’t have a strong ethnic identity. However, they are still granted white status and the advantages that come with that status. Today, these advantages are *de facto* rather than *de jure*, but are nonetheless powerful in shaping our daily lives. It is on each of us who pass as white to identify how these advantages shape us, not to deny them wholesale.

Because race is a product of social forces, it has also manifested itself along class lines; poor and working-class people were not always perceived as fully white.¹¹ In a society that grants fewer opportunities to those not seen as white, economic and racial forces are inseparable. However, poor and working-class whites were eventually granted full entry into whiteness as a way to exploit labor. If poor whites were focused on feeling superior to those below them in status, they were less focused on those above. The poor and working classes, if united across race, could be a powerful force. But racial divisions have served to keep them from organizing against the owning class who profits from their labor.¹² Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren't also experiencing racism. I grew up in poverty and felt a deep sense of shame about being poor. But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white.

RACISM

To understand racism, we need to first distinguish it from mere prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is pre-judgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and then are projected onto everyone from that group. Our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages.

All humans have prejudice; we cannot avoid it. If I am aware that a social group exists, I will have gained information about that group from the society around me. This information helps me make sense of the group from my cultural framework. People who claim not to be prejudiced are demonstrating a profound lack of self-awareness. Ironically, they are also demonstrating the power of socialization—we have all been taught in schools, through movies, and from family members, teachers, and clergy that it is important not to be prejudiced. Unfortunately, the prevailing belief that prejudice is bad causes us to deny its unavoidable reality.

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Prejudice is foundational to understanding white fragility because suggesting that white people have racial prejudice is perceived as saying that we are bad and should be ashamed. We then feel the need to defend our character rather than explore the inevitable racial prejudices we have absorbed so that we might change them. In this way, our misunderstanding about what prejudice is protects it.

Discrimination is *action* based on prejudice. These actions include ignoring, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander, and violence. For example, if hatred is the emotion we feel because of our prejudice, extreme acts of discrimination, such as violence, may follow. These forms of discrimination are generally clear and recognizable. But if what we feel is more subtle, such as mild discomfort, the discrimination is likely to also be subtle, even hard to detect. Most of us can acknowledge that we do feel some unease around certain groups of people, if only a heightened sense of self-consciousness. But this feeling doesn't come naturally. Our unease comes from living separate from a group of people while simultaneously absorbing incomplete or erroneous information about them. When the prejudice causes me to act differently—I am less relaxed around you or I avoid interacting with you—I am now discriminating. Prejudice always manifests itself in action because the way I see the world drives my actions in the world. Everyone has prejudice, and everyone discriminates. Given this reality, inserting the qualifier “reverse” is nonsensical.

When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, professor of American studies and anthropology at Wesleyan University, explains, “Racism is a structure, not an event.”¹³ American women's struggle for suffrage illustrates how institutional power transforms prejudice and discrimination into structures of oppression. Everyone has prejudice and discriminates, but structures of oppression go well beyond individuals. While women could be prejudiced and discriminate against men in individual interactions, women as a group could not deny men their civil

rights. But men as a group could and did deny women their civil rights. Men could do so because they controlled all the institutions. Therefore, the only way women could gain suffrage was for men to grant it to them; women could not grant suffrage to themselves.

Similarly, racism—like sexism and other forms of oppression—occurs when a racial group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically. Racism is a system. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the intersection of race and gender in the example of suffrage; *white* men granted suffrage to women, but only granted full access to white women. Women of color were denied full access until the Voting Rights Act of 1964.

The system of racism begins with ideology, which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society. From birth, we are conditioned into accepting and not questioning these ideas. Ideology is reinforced across society, for example, in schools and textbooks, political speeches, movies, advertising, holiday celebrations, and words and phrases. These ideas are also reinforced through social penalties when someone questions an ideology and through the limited availability of alternative ideas. Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence.¹⁴ Because these ideas are constantly reinforced, they are very hard to avoid believing and internalizing. Examples of ideology in the United States include individualism, the superiority of capitalism as an economic system and democracy as a political system, consumerism as a desirable lifestyle, and meritocracy (anyone can succeed if he or she works hard).

The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort or talent. Those who don't succeed are just not as naturally capable, deserving, or hardworking. Ideologies that obscure racism as a system of inequality are perhaps the most powerful

racial forces because once we accept our positions within racial hierarchies, these positions seem natural and difficult to question, even when we are disadvantaged by them. In this way, very little external pressure needs to be applied to keep people in their places; once the rationalizations for inequality are internalized, both sides will uphold the relationship.

Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. It is not limited to a single act or person. Nor does it move back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color. The direction of power between white people and people of color is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology. Racism differs from individual racial prejudice and racial discrimination in the historical accumulation and ongoing use of institutional power and authority to support the prejudice and to systematically enforce discriminatory behaviors with far-reaching effects.

People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against white people, but they lack the social and institutional power that transforms their prejudice and discrimination into racism; the impact of their prejudice on whites is temporary and contextual. Whites hold the social and institutional positions in society to infuse their racial prejudice into the laws, policies, practices, and norms of society in a way that people of color do not. A person of color may refuse to wait on me if I enter a shop, but people of color cannot pass legislation that prohibits me and everyone like me from buying a home in a certain neighborhood.

People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against their own and other groups of color, but this bias ultimately holds them down and, in this way, reinforces the system of racism that still benefits whites. Racism is a society-wide dynamic that occurs at the group level. When I say that only whites can be racist, I mean that in the United States, only whites have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color. People of color do not have this power and privilege over white people.

Many whites see racism as a thing of the past, and of course, we are well served not to acknowledge it in the present. Yet racial disparity

between whites and people of color continues to exist in every institution across society, and in many cases is increasing rather than decreasing. Although segregation may make these disparities difficult for whites to see and easy to deny, racial disparities and their effects on overall quality of life have been extensively documented by a wide range of agencies. Among those documenting these challenges are the US Census Bureau, the United Nations, academic groups such as the UCLA Civil Rights Project and the Metropolis Project, and nonprofits such as the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League.¹⁵

Scholar Marilyn Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage to describe the interlocking forces of oppression.¹⁶ If you stand close to a birdcage and press your face against the wires, your perception of the bars will disappear and you will have an almost unobstructed view of the bird. If you turn your head to examine one wire of the cage closely, you will not be able to see the other wires. If your understanding of the cage is based on this myopic view, you may not understand why the bird doesn't just go around the single wire and fly away. You might even assume that the bird liked or chose its place in the cage.

But if you stepped back and took a wider view, you would begin to see that the wires come together in an interlocking pattern—a pattern that works to hold the bird firmly in place. It now becomes clear that a network of systematically related barriers surrounds the bird. Taken individually, none of these barriers would be that difficult for the bird to get around, but because they interlock with each other, they thoroughly restrict the bird. While some birds may escape from the cage, most will not. And certainly those that do escape will have to navigate many barriers that birds outside the cage do not.

The birdcage metaphor helps us understand why racism can be so hard to see and recognize: we have a limited view. Without recognizing how our position in relation to the bird defines how much of the cage we can see, we rely on single situations, exceptions, and anecdotal evidence for our understanding, rather than on broader, interlocking patterns. Although there are always exceptions, the patterns are consistent and well documented: People of color are confined and shaped by forces

and barriers that are not accidental, occasional, or avoidable. These forces are systematically related to each other in ways that restrict their movement.

Individual whites may be “against” racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group. David Wellman succinctly summarizes racism as “a system of advantage based on race.”¹⁷ These advantages are referred to as *white privilege*, a sociological concept referring to advantages that are taken for granted by whites and that cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color in the same context (government, community, workplace, schools, etc.).¹⁸ But let me be clear: stating that racism privileges whites does not mean that individual white people do not struggle or face barriers. It does mean that we do not face the particular barriers of racism.

As with prejudice and discrimination, we can remove the qualifier *reverse* from any discussion of racism. By definition, racism is a deeply embedded historical system of institutional power. It is not fluid and does not change direction simply because a few individuals of color manage to excel.

WHITENESS AS A POSITION OF STATUS

Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others. Reflecting on the social and economic advantages of being classified as white, critical race scholar Cheryl Harris coined the phrase “whiteness as property.” Tracing the evolving concept of whiteness across legal history, she explains:

By according whiteness an actual legal status, an aspect of identity was converted into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest. The law’s construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white); of

privilege (what benefits accrue to that status); and, of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status). Whiteness at various times signifies and is deployed as identity, status, and property, sometimes singularly, sometimes in tandem.¹⁹

Harris's analysis is useful because it shows how identity and perceptions of identity can grant or deny resources. These resources include self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all the above.

We might think of whiteness as all the aspects of being white— aspects that go beyond mere physical differences and are related to the meaning and resultant material advantage of being defined as white in society: what is granted and how it is granted based on that meaning. Instead of the typical focus on how racism hurts people of color, to examine whiteness is to focus on how racism elevates white people.

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one's life and perceptions.

People of color, including W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, have been writing about whiteness for decades, if not centuries. These writers urged white people to turn their attention onto themselves to explore what it means to be white in a society that is so divided by race. For example, in 1946, a French reporter asked expatriate writer Richard Wright his thoughts on the "Negro problem" in the United States. Wright replied, "There isn't any Negro problem; there is only a white problem."²⁰

As Wright pointed out, racism against people of color doesn't occur in a vacuum. Yet the idea that racism in the United States can operate

outside white people is reinforced through celebrations such as Black History Month, in which we study the Civil War and civil rights eras as if they occurred separately from all US history. In addition to the general way these color-based celebrations take whites out of the equation, there are specific ways that the achievements of people of color are separated from the overall social context and depoliticized, for instance, in stories we tell about black cultural heroes.

The story of Jackie Robinson is a classic example of how whiteness obscures racism by rendering whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible. Robinson is often celebrated as the first African American to break the color line and play in major-league baseball. While Robinson was certainly an amazing baseball player, this story line depicts him as racially special, a black man who broke the color line himself. The subtext is that Robinson finally had what it took to play with whites, as if no black athlete before him was strong enough to compete at that level. Imagine if instead, the story went something like this: "Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-league baseball." This version makes a critical distinction because no matter how fantastic a player Robinson was, he simply could not play in the major leagues if whites—who controlled the institution—did not allow it. Were he to walk onto the field before being granted permission by white owners and policy makers, the police would have removed him.

Narratives of racial exceptionalism obscure the reality of ongoing institutional white control while reinforcing the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy. They also do whites a disservice by obscuring the white allies who, behind the scenes, worked hard and long to open the field to African American players. These allies could serve as much-needed role models for other whites (although we also need to acknowledge that in the case of the desegregation of baseball, there was an economic incentive for these allies).

I am not against Black History Month. But it should be celebrated in a way that doesn't reinforce whiteness. For those who ask why there is

no White History Month, the answer illustrates how whiteness works. White history is implied in the absence of its acknowledgment; white history is the norm for history. Thus, our need to qualify that we are speaking about black history or women's history suggests that these contributions lie outside the norm.

Ruth Frankenberg, a premier white scholar in the field of whiteness studies, describes whiteness as multidimensional. These dimensions include a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged.²¹ To say that whiteness is a location of structural advantage is to recognize that to be white is to be in a privileged position within society and its institutions—to be seen as an insider and to be granted the benefits of belonging. This position automatically bestows unearned advantages. Whites control all major institutions of society and set the policies and practices that others must live by. Although rare individual people of color may be inside the circles of power—Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Marco Rubio, Barack Obama—they support the status quo and do not challenge racism in any way significant enough to be threatening. Their positions of power do not mean these public figures don't experience racism (Obama endured insults and resistance previously unheard-of), but the status quo remains intact.

To say that whiteness is a standpoint is to say that a significant aspect of white identity is to see oneself as an individual, outside or innocent of race—"just human." This standpoint views white people and their interests as central to, and representative of, humanity. Whites also produce and reinforce the dominant narratives of society—such as individualism and meritocracy—and use these narratives to explain the positions of other racial groups. These narratives allow us to congratulate ourselves on our success within the institutions of society and blame others for their lack of success.

To say that that whiteness includes a set of cultural practices that are not recognized by white people is to understand racism as a network

of norms and actions that consistently create advantage for whites and disadvantage for people of color. These norms and actions include basic rights and benefits of the doubt, purportedly granted to all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people. The dimensions of racism benefiting white people are usually invisible to whites. We are unaware of, or do not acknowledge, the meaning of race and its impact on our own lives. Thus we do not recognize or admit to white privilege and the norms that produce and maintain it. It follows that to name whiteness, much less suggest that it has meaning and grants unearned advantage, will be deeply disconcerting and destabilizing, thus triggering the protective responses of white fragility.

WHITE SUPREMACY

When we look back to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, we might think of white supremacists as the people we saw in photos and on television, beating blacks at lunch counters, bombing black churches, and screaming at little Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to integrate an all-white elementary school in Louisiana in 1960. Today we might think of the self-described “alt-right” white nationalists marching with torches in Virginia and shouting “blood and soil” as they protest the removal of Confederate war memorials. Most white people do not identify with these images of white supremacists and so take great umbrage to the term being used more broadly. For sociologists and those involved in current racial justice movements, however, white supremacy is a descriptive and useful term to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white and the practices based on this assumption. White supremacy in this context does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination. Again, racism is a structure, not an event. While hate groups that openly proclaim white superiority do exist and this term refers to them also, the popular consciousness solely associates *white supremacy* with these radical groups. This reductive definition obscures

the reality of the larger system at work and prevents us from addressing this system.

While racism in other cultures exists based on different ideas of which racial group is superior to another, the United States is a global power, and through movies and mass media, corporate culture, advertising, US-owned manufacturing, military presence, historical colonial relations, missionary work, and other means, white supremacy is circulated globally. This powerful ideology promotes the idea of whiteness as the ideal for humanity well beyond the West. White supremacy is especially relevant in countries that have a history of colonialism by Western nations.

In his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills argues that the racial contract is a tacit and sometimes explicit agreement among members of the peoples of Europe to assert, promote, and maintain the ideal of white supremacy in relation to all other people of the world. This agreement is an intentional and integral characteristic of the social contract, underwriting all other social contracts. White supremacy has shaped a system of global European domination: it brings into existence whites and nonwhites, full persons and subpersons. It influences white moral theory and moral psychology and is imposed on nonwhites through ideological conditioning and violence. Mills says that “what has usually been taken . . . as the racist ‘exception’ has really been the rule; what has been taken as the ‘rule’ . . . [racial equality] . . . has really been the exception.”²²

Mills describes white supremacy as “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.”²³ He notes that although white supremacy has shaped Western political thought for hundreds of years, it is never named. In this way, white supremacy is rendered invisible while other political systems—socialism, capitalism, fascism—are identified and studied. In fact, much of white supremacy’s power is drawn from its invisibility, the taken-for-granted aspects that underwrite all other political and social contracts.

Mills makes two points that are critical to our understanding of white fragility. First, white supremacy is never acknowledged. Second, we cannot study any sociopolitical system without addressing how that

system is mediated by race. The failure to acknowledge white supremacy protects it from examination and holds it in place.

In Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay "The Case for Reparations," he makes a similar point:

To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. . . . [W]hite supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.²⁴

In light of the reality of historical and continual white supremacy, white complaints about "reverse" racism by programs intended to ameliorate the most basic levels of discrimination are profoundly petty and delusional. As Mills summarizes:

Both globally and within particular nation states, then, white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology . . . skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differing racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further.²⁵

Race scholars use the term *white supremacy* to describe a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white. This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group. If,

for example, we look at the racial breakdown of the people who control our institutions, we see telling numbers in 2016–2017:

- Ten richest Americans: 100 percent white (seven of whom are among the ten richest in the world)
- US Congress: 90 percent white
- US governors: 96 percent white
- Top military advisers: 100 percent white
- President and vice president: 100 percent white
- US House Freedom Caucus: 99 percent white
- Current US presidential cabinet: 91 percent white
- People who decide which TV shows we see: 93 percent white
- People who decide which books we read: 90 percent white
- People who decide which news is covered: 85 percent white
- People who decide which music is produced: 95 percent white
- People who directed the one hundred top-grossing films of all time, worldwide: 95 percent white
- Teachers: 82 percent white
- Full-time college professors: 84 percent white
- Owners of men's professional football teams: 97 percent white²⁶

These numbers are not describing minor organizations. Nor are these institutions special-interest groups. The groups listed above are the most powerful in the country. These numbers are not a matter of “good people” versus “bad people.” They represent power and control by a racial group that is in the position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interests across the entire society.

One of the most potent ways white supremacy is disseminated is through media representations, which have a profound impact on how we see the world. Those who write and direct films are our cultural narrators; the stories they tell shape our worldviews. Given that the majority of white people live in racial isolation from people of color (and black people in particular) and have very few authentic cross-racial

relationships, white people are deeply influenced by the racial messages in films. Consider one statistic from the preceding list: of the hundred top-grossing films worldwide in 2016, ninety-five were directed by white Americans (ninety-nine of them by men). That is an incredibly homogeneous group of directors. Because these men are most likely at the top of the social hierarchy in terms of race, class, and gender, they are the least likely to have a wide variety of authentic egalitarian cross-racial relationships. Yet they are in the position to represent the racial “other.” Their representations of the “other” are thereby extremely narrow and problematic, and yet they are reinforced over and over. Further, these biased representations have been disseminated worldwide; while white supremacy originated in the West, it circulates globally.

White resistance to the term *white supremacy* prevents us from examining how these messages shape us. Explicit white supremacists understand this. Christian Picciolini, a former white nationalist, explains that white nationalists recognized that they had to distance themselves from the terms *racist* and *white supremacy* to gain broader appeal. He describes the “alt-right” and white nationalist movements as the culmination of a thirty-year effort to massage the white supremacist message: “We recognized back then that we were turning away the average American white racists and that we needed to look and speak more like our neighbors. The idea we had was to blend in, normalize, make the message more palatable.”²⁷ Derek Black, godson of David Duke and former key youth leader in the white nationalist movement, explains: “My whole talk was the fact that you could run as Republicans, and say things like we need to shut down immigration, we need to fight affirmative action, we need to end globalism, and you could win these positions, maybe as long as you didn’t get outed as a white nationalist and get all the controversy that comes along with it.”²⁸

Today’s white nationalists are not the first to recognize the importance of distancing oneself from more-explicit expressions of white supremacy. In a 1981 interview, Lee Atwater, Republican political strategist and adviser to presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, explained what came to be known as “the Southern strategy”—how

to appeal to the racism of white Southern voters without pronouncing it openly:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger"—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. . . . But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."²⁹

Our umbrage at the term *white supremacy* only serves to protect the processes it describes and obscure the mechanisms of racial inequality. Still, I understand that the term is very charged for many white people, especially older white people who associate the term with extreme hate groups. However, I hope to have made clear that white supremacy is something much more pervasive and subtle than the actions of explicit white nationalists. White supremacy describes the culture we live in, a culture that positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal. White supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color; it is the deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.

Naming white supremacy changes the conversation in two key ways: It makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs. It also points us in the direction of the lifelong work that is uniquely ours, challenging our complicity with and investment in racism. This does not mean that people of color do not play a part but that the full weight of responsibility rests with those who control the institutions.

THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME

Sociologist Joe Feagin coined the term “white racial frame” to describe how whites circulate and reinforce racial messages that position whites as superior.³⁰ In this way, the white racial frame rests on, and is a key mechanism of, white supremacy. The frame is deep and extensive, with thousands of stored “bits.” These bits are pieces of cultural information—images, stories, interpretations, omissions, silences—that are passed along from one person and group to the next, and from one generation to the next. The bits circulate both explicitly and implicitly, for example, through movies, television, news, and other media and stories told to us by family and friends. By constantly using the white racial frame to interpret social relations and integrating new bits, whites reinscribe the frame ever deeper.

At the most general level, the racial frame views whites as superior in culture and achievement and views people of color as generally of less social, economic, and political consequence; people of color are seen as inferior to whites in the making and keeping of the nation. At the next level of framing, because social institutions (education, medicine, law, government, finance, and the military) are controlled by whites, white dominance is unremarkable and taken for granted. That whites are disproportionately enriched and privileged via these institutions is also taken for granted; we are entitled to more privileges and resources because we are “better” people. At the deepest level of the white frame, negative stereotypes and images of racial others as inferior are reinforced and accepted. At this level, corresponding emotions such as fear, contempt, and resentment are also stored.

The frame includes both negative understandings of people of color and positive understandings of whites and white institutions. It is so internalized, so submerged, that it is never consciously considered or challenged by most whites. To get a sense of the white racial frame below the surface of your conscious awareness, think back to the earliest time that you were aware that people from racial groups other than your own existed. People of color recall a sense of always having been aware, while most white people recall being aware by at least

age five. If you lived in a primarily white environment and are having trouble remembering, think about Disney movies, music videos, sports heroes, Chinese food, Aunt Jemima syrup, Uncle Ben's rice, the Taco Bell Chihuahua, Columbus Day, Apu from *The Simpsons*, and the donkey from *Shrek*.

Reflect on these representations and ask yourself, Did your parents tell you that race didn't matter and that everyone was equal? Did they have many friends of color? If people of color did not live in your neighborhood, why didn't they? Where did they live? What images, sounds, and smells did you associate with these other neighborhoods? What kind of activities did you think went on there? Were you encouraged to visit these neighborhoods, or were you discouraged from visiting these neighborhoods?

What about schools? What made a school good? Who went to good schools? Who went to bad schools? If the schools in your area were racially segregated (as most schools in the United States are), why didn't you attend school together? If this is because you lived in different neighborhoods, why did you live in different neighborhoods? Were "their" schools considered equal to, better than, or worse than, yours? If there was busing in your town, in which direction did it go; who was bused into whose schools? Why did the busing go in one direction and not the other?

If you went to school together, did you all sit together in the cafeteria? If not, why not? Were the honors or advanced placement classes and the lower-track classes equally racially integrated? If not, why not?

Now think about your teachers. When was the first time you had a teacher of the same race as yours? Did you often have teachers of the same race as your own?

Most white people, in reflecting on these questions, realize that they almost always had white teachers; many did not have a teacher of color until college. Conversely, most people of color have rarely if ever had a teacher who reflected their own race(s). Why is it important to reflect on our teachers in our effort to uncover our racial socialization and the messages we receive from schools?

As you answer these questions, also consider which races were geographically closer to you than others. If your school was perceived as racially diverse, which races were more represented, and how did the racial distribution affect the sense of value associated with the school? For example, if white and Asian-heritage students were the primary racial groups in your school, your school was likely to be seen as better than a school with more representation from black and Latinx students. What were you learning about the racial hierarchy and your place in it from geography?

If you lived and went to school in racial segregation as most people in the United States do, you had to make sense of the incongruity between the claim that everyone was equal and the lived reality of segregation. If you lived in an integrated neighborhood and/or attended an integrated school, you had to make sense of the segregation in most of society outside the school, especially in segments considered of higher value or quality. It is also highly likely that there was still racial separation within the school. And for those of us who may have grown up in more integrated environments due to social class or changing neighborhood demographics, it is unlikely that integration has been sustained in our current lives. Reflection on these questions provides an entry point into the deeper messages that we all absorb and that shape our behavior and responses below the conscious level.

In the US, race is encoded in geography. I can name every neighborhood in my city and its racial makeup. I can also tell you if a neighborhood is coming up or down in terms of home equity, and this will be based primarily on how its racial demographics are changing. Going up? It will be getting whiter. Going down? It will be getting less white. When I was a child, posters on my school walls and television shows like *Sesame Street* told me explicitly that all people were equal, but we simply do not live together across race. I had to make sense of this separation. If we were equal, why did we live separately? It must be normal and natural to live apart (certainly no adult in my life was complaining about the separation). And at a deeper level, it must be righteous that we live apart, since we are better people. How did I get the message that

we were better people? Consider how we talk about white neighborhoods: good, safe, sheltered, clean, desirable. By definition, other spaces (not white) are bad, dangerous, crime-ridden and to be avoided; these neighborhoods are not positioned as sheltered and innocent. In these ways, the white racial frame is under construction.

Predominately white neighborhoods are not outside of race—they are *teeming* with race. Every moment we spend in those environments reinforces powerful aspects of the white racial frame, including a limited worldview, a reliance on deeply problematic depictions of people of color, comfort in segregation with no sense that there might be value in knowing people of color, and internalized superiority. In turn, our capacity to engage constructively across racial lines becomes profoundly limited.

To illustrate an early lesson in white racial framing, imagine that a white mother and her white child are in the grocery store. The child sees a black man and shouts out, “Mommy, that man’s skin is black!” Several people, including the black man, turn to look. How do you imagine the mother would respond? Most people would immediately put their finger to their mouth and say, “Shush!” When white people are asked what the mother might be feeling, most agree that she is likely to feel anxiety, tension, and embarrassment. Indeed, many of us have had similar experiences wherein the message was clear: we should not talk openly about race.

When I use this example with my students, sometimes a student will say that the mother is just teaching her child to be polite. In other words, naming this man’s race would be impolite. But why? What is shameful about being black—so shameful that we should pretend that we don’t notice?³¹ The mother’s reaction would probably be the same if the man had a visible disability of some kind or was obese. But if the child had seen a white person and shouted out, “Mommy, that man’s skin is white!” it is unlikely that the mother would feel the same anxiety, tension, and embarrassment that would have accompanied the first statement.

Now imagine that the child had shouted out how handsome the man was, or how strong. These statements would probably be met with

chuckles and smiles. The child would not likely be shushed, because we consider these statements compliments.

The example of a child publicly calling out a black man's race and embarrassing the mother illustrates several aspects of white children's racial socialization. First, children learn that it is taboo to openly talk about race. Second, they learn that people should pretend not to notice undesirable aspects that define some people as less valuable than others (a large birthmark on someone's face, a person using a wheelchair). These lessons manifest themselves later in life, when white adults drop their voices before naming the race of someone who isn't white (and especially so if the race being named is *black*), as if blackness were shameful or the word itself were impolite. If we add all the comments we make about people of color privately, when we are less careful, we may begin to recognize how white children are taught to navigate race.